



TOPIC: MARKETING AND SALES

'CRAFT' IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA

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A Commentary with Stephen Beaumont

Anyone who has spent any time drinking beer on either side of the Atlantic Ocean will be aware that there are several fairly fundamental differences between the brewing industries of Europe and North America. These range from the importance of colour in beer style – some bars in France and Italy, for example, will still list beers according to hue rather than style or place of origin – to the admiration accorded European legacy breweries, be they small family operations such as Lefebvre in Belgium or respected giants like Heineken or Carlsberg.

And so it was with some anticipation that a sizable audience packed the auditorium at the recent Brewers Forum in Prague to hear Bob Pease, president and CEO of the Brewers Association in the United States, and Christian Weber, vice-president of the Brewers of Europe, engage in a 'transatlantic dialogue' about the future of beer.

While the exchange did feature several interesting nuggets of insight – as when Weber suggested that no alcohol beers should be positioned not against traditional beer, but rather as an alternative to sodas like Coke and Pepsi or Pease noted that his organization’s members were seeing a gradual shift to lower alcohol beers – there was little disagreement or even divergence seen on stage.

It was another seminar that illustrated where the continents differ, and stepping up to the task was the early morning panel on ‘Craft’ and its Meaning,’ moderated by Michal Voldřich, president of the Czech-Moravian Union of Microbreweries, but unquestionably led by British beer writer, Pete Brown.

Brown began the discussion with a presentation based upon his book, *Craft: An Argument*, which bears the slightly unwieldy but highly descriptive subtitle ‘Why the term ‘Craft Beer’ is completely undefinable, hopelessly misunderstood and absolutely essential.’ As per his book, Brown made the case that since its first use – Vince Cottone in 1984 or Michael Jackson in 1982 or, unmentioned by Brown, Jackson in his 1977 book, *The World Guide to Beer* – the term ‘craft’ has been continually cloaked in controversy.

After first noting, and thoroughly debunking, Cottone’s definition of ‘small,’ ‘traditional,’ ‘hand-crafted,’ ‘uncompromised,’ and ‘marketed locally,’ Brown proceeded to critique both the past and present definitions attempted by the Brewers Association, ultimately making his point by positioning the clearly mainstream and ‘craft’ Yuengling Light against the complex and barrel-aged and not ‘craft’ Goose Island Bourbon County Stout.

From there, Brown delved into the definition of craft as a word, rather than as a beer term, and noted the global shift among national associations of breweries from ‘craft’ to ‘independent.’ Then the floor opened up to the other presenters and the audience and things really got interesting.

Rick Kempen, of the Dutch firm Bier & Co, made the astute point that ‘craft’ is as much about emotion as it is any more tangible factor, arguing that the size or ownership of a brewery is less important than how and the degree to which the consumer feels connected to it – anathema to the public position of the Brewers Association. Others questioned why storied, multi-generational European breweries should be excluded from the common definition of ‘craft,’ whereas a two month old start-up with much enthusiasm but little expertise would qualify. Others still raised the issue of whether or not the term has any salient role to play in the traditional European beer nations.

Panelist Paul Lefebvre, CEO of Brasserie Lefebvre, noted that the presence of such Belgian ‘craft’ breweries as Brasserie de la Senne has importantly opened up his national market to younger consumers, who might have been reluctant to embrace the beers their parents drank. Co-panelist Ramsay Wells, English expatriate founder of Pato Brewing in Portugal, then chimed in that, in such a youthful beer market as his, ‘craft’ is key to generating ‘buzz.’

Offering a North American perspective, your humble correspondent suggested that the reason ‘craft’ is such a complicated and, indeed, pretty much undefinable term when related to beer is because its original and to a degree still primary purpose is to differentiate beers made by non-multinational breweries from those produced by the global beer powers. Like ‘microbrewery’ before it, ‘craft’ in the U.S. is a handy way of saying ‘not a Miller, Coors, or Anheuser-Busch beer,’ or ‘not a Molson or Labatt beer’ in Canada, without actually stating as much.

In Europe, on the other hand, where the sort of brewing oligopoly once seen in North America never took hold to the same degree, 'craft' means what the beer-drinking public needs it to mean, be that 'brewer of untraditional beer,' as in Czechia or Germany, 'fresh perspective on brewing,' as in Belgium, or simply 'new,' as in the U.K. and elsewhere.

Yet still, there are those who would argue that the word 'craft' has grown obsolete, such has been its misuse and abuse by brewers and marketers alike. But if that were true, couldn't the same be said about 'authentic' and 'unique,' two other words that have suffered more than their share of exploitation and manipulation at the hands of advertising agencies world-wide?

Rather, I would posit that 'craft' remains relevant to the beer market so long as it continues to evoke in consumers a sense of what they are likely to get when and where they make their beer purchase, be that independent, small-scale, the product of a non-multinational brewer, or simply something hazy.